

We Are Penn State

November 16, 2011

We Are... Penn State. For Penn Staters it is a chant, a mantra, a way of life. I was raised with these words. My parents were alumni, my aunt, even my neighbors. I was raised on the legend of Joe Paterno. I believed Joe Paterno was above the fray, a man who put education, honesty, integrity, and honor above all else. For forty years he seemed to do just that, but then in the moment when he needed those things most of all, he appears to have put his program, his reputation, and perhaps his loyalty to a friend above what mattered most. I have always worn my Penn State pride on my sleeve. My basement is painted blue and white, and much of my wardrobe bears the Penn State logo. For the first time in my life I questioned my pride in PSU, I felt disbelief, anger, despair, embarrassment, sadness, and shame. Shame. That is a word I had never before tied to Penn State. I wondered if I could continue to chant the phrase "We Are... Penn State."

I am not writing this letter to defend Joe Paterno, Graham Spanier, Tim Curley, or anyone else connected to the horrific scandal that has rocked our proud university. I do not know that the decisions and lack of actions by those men can or even should be defended. Perhaps that is what is the most disappointing of all, that men like Joe Paterno could make such egregious decisions, abandoning those who needed help and protection the most.

As a child I had thought that Joe Paterno was Penn State. Once I became a student, I realized that Penn State was so much more than Joe Paterno and our football team. They are a very visible aspect of our university, but they are not Penn State. We Are...so much more.

Penn State is not defined by the actions of a small group who abandoned children who were being abused out of some twisted belief that their program was too big to fail. Tim Curley and Graham Spanier are not Penn State. Jerry Sandusky most certainly is not Penn State. Joe Paterno did great deeds to help make Penn State what it is, but Joe Paterno is not Penn State either. The few hundred students who foolishly and carelessly rioted after Paterno's dismissal are also not Penn State.

We Are... instead the ten thousand students, fans, and alumni who attend a candlelight vigil to pray for the real victims in this tragedy. We Are...the concerned alumni who founded #ProudPSUforRAINN. RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network) is an organization that fights to protect those very people who were abandoned by the lack of action of those overseeing our football program. We Are... those who in one week's time have donated \$300,000 to that cause. We are... the local businesses and students who have sold blue ribbons and blue shirts to raise money for child abuse victims in the wake of these tragedies. It is estimated that over \$50,000 were raised through these efforts. These were not attempts at good PR by the university or its administrators, these were independent members of the Penn State community who saw a wrong and are trying to right it. It cannot erase what was done by those who blackened Penn State's name, but in the long run it can go on to do a far greater good.

We Are... the thousands of Penn State students who each year run THON. The Penn State Dance Marathon raises millions of dollars for children battling cancer. It is the largest student run philanthropy in the world. Since 1977 THON has raised \$78 million dollars.

We Are... the students and supporters who wore maroon and orange to our annual Blue-White spring game to show our support for the victims of the Virginia Tech shootings. The efforts of those Nittany Lions raised \$110,000 for Virginia Tech memorial funds. We Are... the Penn State bloggers who organized a similar effort to help those affected by the tornadoes that tore through Alabama's campus last year.

We Are... the 1947 Nittany Lions football team. When playing Southern Methodist in the Cotton Bowl, they were asked to have a meeting to discuss Penn State sitting their African American players for the game. Captain Steve Suhey's response? "We are Penn State. There will be no meetings." Our African American players played, and one of them, Wally Triplett, scored the game-tying touchdown.

We Are... Adam Taliaferro, the freshman cornerback on the football team who broke his neck in a game against Ohio State. Adam was told he had a 3% chance of walking again. We Are... those who believed in Adam. Thousands of us attended a vigil at Old Main hoping we could somehow help him beat the odds. Prayers, signs, and support were everywhere. Every storefront in town was adorned with a simple sign. "We Believe". Adam worked tirelessly, and refused to quit. He walked again. He walked when he led the team out of the tunnel for the first game of the next season, and he walked at his graduation. He has gone on to a law degree from Rutgers University.

We Are... the football players who took the field against Nebraska after a week of distractions and pressures we couldn't even imagine a week before. These were young men who had nothing to do with the mistakes made by their coaches and administrators who were supposed to know better. These young men who played their hearts out on Saturday, but came up just a little short.

We Are...the fans who cheered those players despite their loss because we recognized the effort they gave in those trying times and defeat. Fans who cheered because Penn State has always been about HOW you played, not the final score.

We Are... the team with no names on the backs of their jerseys, because it is about the team, not the individual. We Are... one of the highest graduation rates among Division I College football teams, while still playing at a high level. We Are... 68 National Championships in dozens of sports without a single major NCAA violation. We Are... dozens of Academic All Americans. We Are... Congressmen and women, Cabinet members, Nobel Prize winners, Emmy winners, Olympians, astronauts, and best-selling authors. We Are... engineers, musicians, teachers, businessmen, bankers, poets, lawyers, doctors, scientists, and journalists thanks to a world-class education. We Are... parents who cannot believe what was done to those children. We want to see justice served.

We Are... Penn State, and I am still proud to say that.

Steven Derion- Class of 2001

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